

Summer Worship at First UNJ - 2022

*Ambiguity and Paradox - Chris
Baglieri*

Welcome and Greet Each Other

***[Please say who you are, why we are gathered as we are
this summer]***

Reminder of Our Covenant - Adopted at the 2017
congregational meeting.

Chalice Lighting - read by member

Embrace the Night

by Rev. Jennifer Gracen

Universal mystery,
Guide us away from the desire to
Shine light in all the corners.
Teach us to embrace the night,
For without the darkness,
We never see the stars.

Opening Words: The Paradox of Ancestry
by Rev. Chris Rothbauer

We gather together this morning,
Because others came before us.
Some have left examples for us to follow,
Others lessons for us to learn from,
and the paradox is that many have left both pain and
joy.
We honor our ancestors this morning, not because they
are perfect,
But because, without them, we would not be here,

Together,
Sharing our joy, our pain, our living and our dying.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/paradox-ancestry>

Sharing Joys, Sorrows, Milestones

Introduction of today's theme - Opening quote or Reading

Definitions: Ambiguity: having more than one possible meaning or interpretation; uncertainty, inexactness. Paradox: a situation or statement that seems contradictory or absurd but is actually valid or true; a contradiction. A statement or concept that contradicts itself.

Physicist Niels Bohr once said - "There are trivial truths and there are great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true."

I think that the paradox of liberal religion is that we assert first that every person has inherent worth (First Principle) , as well as the right to search for and express their own truth, and yet we struggle to accept people whose truths are different than our own. We talk about political "polarization", and we increasingly see the

Reading #1

Being a People of Paradox & Ambiguity by Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray

...In this time of uncertainty, the idea of paradox can be helpful. A paradox is when a seemingly contradictory idea, when more deeply explored, is found to be true. ...I am a firm believer that our lives are always more uncertain, ambiguous, and informed by paradox than we like to think. Therefore, these moments when the uncertainty is so present and clear, we have

opportunities to grow and develop in how we welcome and live in the midst of the unknown.

...The definition being used in the UU White Supremacy Teach-Ins ...is “the set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that tend to benefit white people and exclude people of color.” It is my hope that as a larger faith community, walking into very difficult conversations in order to guide profound and deep change—that we can foster a greater openness, a willingness to hear the truths we each hold, to hold room for multiple perspectives and yet through listening and a willingness to be changed by our listening, create new ways of sharing, living and practicing our faith.

In “Brave Space,” African-American ...Micky ScottBey Jones ...writes:

“Together we will create brave space
Because there is no such thing as a “safe space”
We exist in the real world

We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.

There is paradox in these words, particularly in the line that we all carry scars and all have caused wounds. ...We live amidst paradox and change, ambiguity and uncertainty, yet this is not an excuse not to act, nor to wait, nor to avoid challenge.

Focusing Questions

- When is a time in your life when you felt like you had to live with major uncertainty or ambiguity. What spiritual or personal practices or resources were helpful in navigating that time?
- As Unitarian Universalists, we talk about the value and wisdom of many religious traditions. We are people who say we can appreciate multiple truths. When have you struggled to make room for a truth different than your own in a personal relationship or community?
- How does ambiguity or paradox show up in your own religious beliefs? Are you comfortable with ambiguity in belief? Has this always been the case, or did you notice a time when ambiguity felt more comfortable than certainty.
- How does power and privilege show up in paradoxical ways? (ie: how women have to demonstrate extra competence in their professions while still getting paid less)
- What terms express paradoxical or ambiguous feelings you’ve experienced? (consider “bittersweet” or “deafening silence”)

Reading 2: *The Inner Work of Holding Paradox*

by Parker

Palmer

If I didn’t have the idea of “holding paradox” to help me understand myself and the world around me, I’d be more lost than I am! For me,

holding paradox means thinking about some (but not all) things as “both-ands” instead of “either-ors.”

So many of our troubles, personal and political, come from either-or thinking. For example, when I’m talking with a person who holds religious or political beliefs that differ from my own, either-or thinking can create a combative situation: “I’m right, so he/she is wrong. Therefore, my job is to win this argument by any means possible.” How rarely such encounters bear fruit!

But both-and thinking can lead to something much more creative: “Maybe I don’t have everything right, and maybe he/she doesn’t have everything wrong. Maybe both of us see part of the truth. If I speak and listen in that spirit, we both might learn something that will expand our understanding. We might even be able to keep this relationship and conversation going.”

Think of how much more civil and creative our conversations across lines of difference would be if we thought that way more often! We’d be working to create a container to hold our differences hospitably instead of trying to win an argument.

Of course, like everything human, this issue begins inside of us, in how we hold our own internal paradoxes. If we can’t hold our inner complexities as both-and instead of either-or, we can’t possibly extend that kind of hospitality to another person.

- What struck you most profoundly and why?

2 minutes to share a response. No cross-talk to the responses. One person speaks for oneself, then the next person does the same, with some silence or space between. People can speak as they are moved to. - End with a moment of silent reflection.

Share the Plate

Casa Freehold Video

Reflection - Reading 3

Alan Watts wrote, “The whole process of nature is an integrated process of immense complexity, and it’s really impossible to tell whether anything that happens in it is good or bad — because you never know what will be the consequence of the misfortune; or, you never know what will be the consequences of good fortune. ...The parable [he shared] makes the same point....

“Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbors came around to commiserate. They said, ‘We are so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate.’ The farmer said, ‘Maybe.’ The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and, in the evening, everybody came back and said, ‘Oh, isn’t that lucky. What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!’ The farmer again said, ‘Maybe.’ The following day his son tried to break one of the horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The

neighbors then said, 'Oh dear, that's too bad,' and the farmer responded, 'Maybe.' The next day the conscription officers came around to conscript people into the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. Again, all the neighbors came around and said, 'Isn't that great!' Again, he said, 'Maybe.'"

The farmer steadfastly refrained from thinking of things in terms of gain or loss, advantage or disadvantage, because one never knows.... In fact, we never really know whether an event is fortune or misfortune, we only know our ever-changing reactions to ever-changing events.

Second Round of Questions Comments

- How have you experienced theodicy in your life (when bad things happen to good people)?
- Do you make room in your life for sacred ambiguity, the idea of moving through the unknown with faith, grace, trust, or awe?
- Have you experienced deep personal growth from an adversity that you didn't think would lead to growth?

Song: If You Want To Sing Out

Closing

In our opening, I quoted the scientist Niels Bohr on "Great Truths." Bohr is also said to have said, " How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress."

For our closing words, I have

Cherish Your Doubts by Rev. Dr. Michael Schuler

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.
Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.
Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on—nothing abides.
Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.
For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.
Indeed, this is the small corner where we connect—and reconnect—with each other.

Extinguishing the chalice - Responsive

"We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again."

Readings from the Common Bowl

“As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We don’t deserve resolution; we deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.” Pema Chödrön

“...The difference between ignorant and educated people is that the latter know more facts. But that has nothing to do with whether they are stupid or intelligent. The difference between stupid and intelligent people—and this is true whether or not they are well-educated—is that intelligent people can handle subtlety. They are not baffled by ambiguous or even contradictory situations—in fact, they expect them and are apt to become suspicious when things seem overly straightforward.” Neal Stephenson

“Listening is more than being quiet while the other person speaks until you can say what you have to say. I like the language Rachel Naomi Remen uses with young doctors to describe what they should practice: ‘generous listening.’ Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability—a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions.” Krista Tippett

“I feel with some passion that what we truly are is private, and almost infinitely complex, and ambiguous, and both external and internal, and double- or triple- or multiply natured, and largely mysterious even to ourselves; and furthermore, that what we are is only part of us, because identity, unlike ‘identity,’ must include what we do. And I think that to find oneself and every aspect of this complexity reduced in the public mind to one property that apparently subsumes all the rest (‘gay,’ ‘black,’ ‘Muslim,’ whatever) is to be the victim of a piece of extraordinary intellectual vulgarity.” Philip Pullman

“Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody. Not a few men who cherish lofty and noble ideals hide them under a bushel for fear of being called different.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

“There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like

all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.” Ursula Le Guin

“The root of happiness is knowing that everything changes. That’s all there is to happiness. It’s nothing you pursue. It’s living in the constant continual paradox of life. The Vedas say that the yes and the no uttered together produce the silence. We spend so much of our time trying to take the yes and the no and resolve it. Instead of being pushed into wonder and not knowing, we have whole explorations of how we deal with paradox, how we live in paradox, how we resolve paradox. The yes and the no, the complete contrariness of life, is actually only meant to move us into silence.” Margaret Wheatley

“...Mystics embrace paradox. Their practice makes them intensely aware of life’s paradoxes. They notice that although everything appears to be part of one unity, life contains many opposites. Everything is united, yet life is made up of endless polarities, such as good and bad, hot and cold, and so on. Mystics sense that things are not immediately what they appear to be and that focusing on the pairs of opposites distracts them from the experience of unity: they understand that reality is larger than the polar opposites that make it up. ...Mystics, as Rumi did through his poetry, advise us to practice seeing beyond what can be seen with the physical eye ... and thereby peacefully embrace and see beyond the paradoxes of life.” Edward Viljoen

“Speaking of salvation, Jesus and a host of other spiritual luminaries have weighed in on the subject with some counterintuitive and paradoxical wisdom. In a nutshell, it is this: ‘Don’t focus on saving yourself.... Focus on serving, saving, helping others. For if you try to save yourself, you lose yourself, yet if you seek to save others, you save both the other and yourself.’ ...When we seek to save others—with our love and our compassion we become aware of our connectedness to the larger whole. Or, as Malvina Reynolds puts it in the song The Magic Penny: ‘Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away. Love is something if you give it away. You end up having more.’” Rev. Richard Davis

“Rev. Charles Magistro ...[writes,] ‘Our way in religion is not the way of ease. We are called to be sailors. For many worlds exist waiting to be discovered. And not the least of them are within ourselves. It takes much persistence, courage and curiosity to look into our own depths, to come to terms with the twin mysteries of being alive and having to die, to see ourselves in new and larger ways without being dishonest about our limitations. We have only begun to discover our potential.’ Unitarian Universalism does not give you freedom from religion; it gives you freedom for religion. Here is the great paradox of our faith.” Rev. Scott Alexander